

FLATHEAD LAKE FISHING GUIDE

Flathead Lake

- ◆ Flathead Lake State Park Site
- 🚣 Fishing Access Site
- ★ Public Boat Access Site
- ▲ Salish & Kootenai Fishing Access Site and Campground



Map produced by:
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Information Services Unit
Kalispell, Montana



406-675-2700



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**
406-752-5501



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

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The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) cooperatively manage Flathead Lake under the Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-management Plan. The plan seeks to increase and protect native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout to at least secure levels, while providing a recreational fishery with harvest based on nonnative fish. To request a copy of the co-management plan, call CSKT at 675-2700, or MFWP at 752-5501.

As an angler, you are key to the plan's success. In the co-management plan, recreational harvest is a major tool for managing the fish populations of Flathead Lake, especially in reducing the number of smaller lake trout (less than the slot limit of 30 inches). In addition, CSKT and FWP encourage anglers to harvest yellow perch and lake whitefish, each of which have very liberal bag limits. Controlling these nonnative fish will benefit native trout. These species are delicious when prepared properly. **You can contribute to the well-being of local communities by donating the fish you harvest to local food banks and community kitchens (see list in this brochure).** There are also opportunities to sell lake whitefish to a commercial buyer; call MFWP or CSKT for details.

In this fishing guide, we provide general tips for catching these species in Flathead Lake using a variety of lures and techniques. Also included are recipes for preparing delicious meals using your catch.

Before you go fishing, please remember to pick up current copies of the state and tribes' fishing regulations. These booklets contain specific bag limits for each species, information on fish identification, and tips for properly releasing native trout you might catch.

FISHING FOR LAKE TROUT

Lake trout (or mackinaw) are primarily fish eaters. They prefer colder water and are usually found near the bottom although they can be found at all depths when the water is cold. Generally fish 30'-100' deep for smaller (2-5 lb.) lakers and over 100' deep for larger lake trout but expect lots of mixing of sizes. Generally, look for areas that will concentrate bait fish such as points, sloping areas of large rubble, or flats adjacent to drop-offs or steep slopes. Expansive flats may not hold many fish. A fish finder helps locate likely spots and may locate schools of bait fish or lake trout but lake trout can hold so tight to the bottom most fish finders won't show them. Lake trout prefer dim light so the best fishing is dawn to mid-morning with generally slow fishing at mid day and sometimes fishing picks up in the evening. Lake trout are generally easy to catch but they move a lot and action can turn on and off. If you're not catching fish and can't see them on the finder move to a new location. If you think the fish are there, try different lures and colors and vary your techniques.

Lake trout up to 5 pounds eat lots of Mysis shrimp and can be delicious fried, baked, barbecued, or smoked. Fish from 5-10 pounds are much oilier and are best if skinned, trimmed, and cooked to allow juices to drain away. Macs over 10 pounds are very oily (see the consumption guide for eating lake trout included in this brochure).

A. Vertical Jigging

This technique has really revolutionized lake trout fishing since it is simple, productive, and requires little gear. A medium weight spinning or baitcasting outfit with 10-lb. test line will work. Drop the lure to the bottom, reel up about a foot and jig the lure up sharply 1-3 feet and then let it free fall back. Jig every 10-20 seconds. Set the hook hard when you feel a tap or jerk. Often the fish will hit as the lure is dropping so if the line stays slack as the jig is sinking, reel up and strike.

Leadhead jigs with plastic "grub" or "Mr. Twister" style bodies are effective and inexpensive. Use 1/2 oz. to 2 oz. jigheads, going to larger heads as you fish deeper. Use 3" bodies for 3-5 lb. macs and go to 5" or larger bodies if you just want big fish. White, chartreuse, and glo-in-the dark are popular colors. You'll increase bites if you tip the jig with a piece of fish (sucker, Norther pike minnow, or perch) or use scents. Salmonids (trout, salamon, whitefish) are illegal as bait.

Jigging spoons can also be very effective. Leadagators, Trilobites, Nordics, Crippled Herring, Kastmasters, and Buzz Bombs will all work. White, chartreuse or green, light blue, or glow are popular colors. Scents or tipping with a small piece of fish may help.

Woods Bay, Yellow Bay, Blue Bay, and West Shore State Park are reasonably sheltered spots with deep water close to the ramp for smaller boats. Other productive jigging areas are the river mouth, Conrad Point, Painted Rocks/Cedar Island, Wildhorse Island, the Narrows, Finley Point, and Gravel Bay.

TROLLING

A. Flatlining

You can readily catch lake trout by trolling lures near the surface in April-June and October-November. Troll 3/8 oz. or larger spoons such as Krocodiles in silver/red or gold/red or minnow-imitation plugs such as Rebels or Rapalas in black/silver, black/gold or fluorescent orange. You can also troll plugs that will dive to 10'-20'. Drop the lure 100'-200' behind the boat and troll parallel to the shore 50-100 yards out in 30'-200' of water. Steeper shorelines such as most of the east shore, Conrad Point to Painted Rocks, Wildhorse Island and around the Narrows are good spots. Concentrate on spawning areas in the fall (points with rock or cobble) such as major points, Wildhorse Island, or around the Narrows.

B. Lead-Core

Lead-core outfits such as those used for kokanee can also be used on lake trout down to 50' deep or more. Fish the same lures and locations as flatlining with 3-8 colors out. This is particularly good as lakers move deeper in summer.

C. Diving Planers and 3-way Rigs

Diving Planers are tied inline 4-6 feet ahead of the lure. They can dive 30-50 feet but will trip when a fish hits to allow a better fight.

An angler can also tie up a rig with a 3-way swivel. The mainline ties to one swivel with a 4'-6' leader off the opposite swivel to a lure. Tie a short leader off the bottom swivel to a banana sinker (2-12 oz.). Depending on the line, speed, lure, and sinker weight you can fish down to 100 feet or more.

D. Downriggers

Downriggers will cost \$100-\$500 but they allow you to fish at precise depths and into very deep water. They also allow you to fish with fairly light gear since the line releases from the heavy downrigger cable and ball when a fish hits. Used with a good fish finder you can target concentrations of fish and prime locations and precisely place your lure. The most common downrigger lure is a squid and dodger or flasher although a variety of lures can be used. Generally, place the squid 2 1/2 dodger lengths behind the dodger and drop the lures 10-50 feet behind the downrigger release. Use an 8" or larger dodger. Silver and chartreuse are popular dodger colors and white, chartreuse, blue, and glow are popular squid colors. Scent or a piece of cut fish on the squid can help. Generally fish near the bottom but don't be afraid to fish mid depths, particularly near the thermocline (40'-60') in summer, or wherever you see the fish on the finder. If you're not catching fish vary the boat speed and vary the distance back from the downrigger release.

E. Steel Line

This method requires a heavier rod with a roller tip, and a large reel such as a Penn 49L with 1,000 feet or more of single strand or braided steel line in 20-40 lb. test. With this method you drag a lure (usually a Flatfish or Kwikfish) along the bottom. It takes 800 feet or more of line to reach bottom in 100 feet of water. This used to be the main method to fish for lake trout and its still one of the best ways to catch big trout but it's physically demanding and requires some expertise. T-50 Flatfish are the most popular although the smaller M-2's also work. Popular colors are blue/white, red/white, perch finish, or frog. Use similar sizes and colors in Kwikfish. To work, the lure has to be skipping on the bottom. Expect to hang up occasionally. These heavy rigs don't give fish under 10 pounds much chance to fight. Usually look for mud/sand/small cobble bottom flats near slope changes or points. The Mid-lake Bar from Angel Point to Cedar Island, Mac Alley south of Wildhorse, and flats near any major points can be good spots.

ICE FISHING

Sheltered bays freeze most years and the entire lake freezes about every 10 years. Be extremely careful about ice conditions. Generally use vertical jigging techniques in 30'-200' of water although you can catch small fish in 10' or less water. Somers Bay, (Somers) Hatchery Bay, Big Arm Bay, and Polson Bay are dependable spots. If the entire lake freezes over try Yellow Bay Point, Skidoo Bay, and Angel Point-Conrad Point, but be careful: conditions can change daily.

SHORE FISHING

Lake trout can be readily caught from shore in May-June and October-November when the water is cool and they're in shallow to look for food (spring) or to spawn (fall). Generally look for steep to moderately sloping bottoms with lots of rubble. Good spots in the fall have been Wayfarers and West Shore State Parks, Polson City Docks, and the bridge in Polson. You can stillfish cutbait (fish) or worms on the bottom or cast 1/4 oz. to 1 oz. lures or jigs. Count down before starting your retrieve so the lure is near bottom. Use silver/red or gold/red lures. You'll lose lures so use inexpensive ones. Most lakers will be 2-4 pounds but you may catch a larger one, particularly in fall.

CAUTION: BE SURE TO STUDY IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS OF LAKE TROUT AND BULL TROUT. FOR A SHORT COURSE ON TROUT IDENTIFICATION AND BIOLOGY, LOG ON TO [HTTP://FWP.STATE.MT.US/BULLTROUTID/](http://FWP.STATE.MT.US/BULLTROUTID/) ON FWP'S WEBSITE. ALL BULL TROUT CAUGHT ON FLATHEAD LAKE MUST BE IMMEDIATELY RELEASED. THIS WEBSITE ALSO OFFERS TRAINING ON RAINBOW AND CUTTHROAT TROUT. ALL CUTTHROAT TROUT CAUGHT IN FLATHEAD LAKE MUST BE IMMEDIATELY RELEASED.

FISHING FOR LAKE WHITEFISH

Lake whitefish have grown greatly in popularity in recent years as anglers have discovered how to catch these tasty, hard-fighting fish. Try them and you'll find they're very different from their cousins, the mountain whitefish. Whitefish usually hit as the lure/jig is dropping or right as it hits the end of the line or bottom. It is important to fish within inches of the bottom, occasionally bumping bottom. We recommend a light action rod and 4-6 pound test line to detect the subtle hits and get the most sport out of these hard fighters. Everyone is still learning about the fishery so don't be afraid to experiment on times, locations, and techniques.

Lake whitefish are hard fighting fish with white, mild-tasting meat. They average about 2 1/2 lbs. but can run over 5 lbs. They eat zooplankton, snails, aquatic insects, and small fish. They are the most abundant gamefish in the lake although no one has figured out how to catch them consistently.

They are found throughout the lake, usually near bottom in 30'-150' of water. In Flathead Lake, look for whitefish in 20'-60' of water over sand and gravel bars and off points. They can be caught in 100'-150' of water but it's trickier. In general, you'll need to be anchored or drifting very slowly. The most popular lures are a Kastmaster spoon or a leadhead jig with a 1 1/2"-2" Mr. Twister or Fuzzygrub body. Other popular lures are Crippled Herring, Swedish Pimple, Rattlesnake, Krocodile Trilobite, and Leadagator. Start with 1/4 ounce lures and go to larger sizes as needed. The best colors imitate yellow perch. Chartreuse is the most popular color and green, silver, yellow, and gold can also work. Usually plain lures will work but occasionally a scent or a few maggots will help. A new method is a lure at the end of the line with a red or whitefish fly (Lake Mary Ronan Special) tipped with maggots tied 18" above.

Short jigging motions are the best. The whitefish usually hit when the lure hits the end of the line. Be alert for a single, soft tap. Experiment. Try jigging continuously to a few second pause and bumping the bottom occasionally to bouncing it on the bottom. Early morning hours are generally the best.

River Mouth Delta: April, May, July, August.

Main Lake: February, March, July, August, October, November. Popular spots are Woods Bay, Gravel Bay, Finley Point, the Narrows, Big Arm Bay, Wildhorse Island, and Peaceful Bay.

Polson Bridge: October, November.

Ice Fishing: Somers and Big Arm bays. Use a fly tipped with maggots and watch the ice.

Flathead River: The whitefish run starts mid-September, peaks mid-October to mid-November, and lasts into January. Good numbers of fish are found from the Stillwater River to Blankenship Bridge with the Old Steel Bridge and Highway 35 Bridge at Kalispell and the U.S. 2 Bridge at Columbia Falls the most popular holes. Look for fish in side eddies with little or no current, 6'-15' of water and a sand or fine gravel bottom. The standard lure is a 1/4 ounce jighead with a 1 1/2"-2" chartreuse Mr. Twister or 1" Berkely Microcraw. It is critical that you hop the jig across the bottom and lift (jig) the instant the lure hits the bottom. You'll feel a very light tap or the fish will just be there when you jig.

Whitefish take a little extra work once you've caught them but you'll be rewarded with some mild, firm tasty fillets. To make it easier to fillet, we recommend cutting out the pelvic fins (the pair of fins in front of the anal vent) and slitting the fish from the vent to the gills. Fillet and skin the fish,

and remove the ribs as you normally do. There is a layer of red muscle under the skin that has a fishy taste. We recommend removal of most of the layer by slicing it off with a fillet knife. It is especially important to remove the red meat if you are going to freeze the fillets. There are also a number of secondary rib bones that you can find by running your finger down the inside of the fillet. Remove these by cutting on each side of the bones with a fillet knife to take out a thin slice. The rib bones angle toward the fish's back.

Your hard work can now be rewarded with a delicious meal. In this brochure, you'll find some of our favorite recipes. They're fairly simple and you'll wow your friends and family with your culinary expertise and a delicious meal. You can also substitute whitefish in any recipe that uses walleye, yellow perch, sole, pollock or similar fish. Many people enjoy lake whitefish smoked or pickled. Enjoy!

TASTY WHITEFISH RECIPES

(You can substitute perch or lake trout if you wish)

WHITEFISH BONNE FEMME

- 1 lb. Fillet of Whitefish
- Flour, Salt, Pepper
- 1 TBSP Butter
- Chopped Green Onions
- 1/4 cup White Wine
- Juice of 1/2 Lemon
- 4 fresh Mushrooms, sliced



Saute green onion and mushrooms in butter until light brown. Coat fish in flour and add. Season with salt and pepper. Cook fish for 2 minutes-turn-cook for 2 minutes. Pour wine and lemon juice over fish. Simmer 2 minutes longer. Serves 4.

MICROWAVE WHITEFISH

1. Melt enough butter to cover bottom of pan.
2. Arrange fillets in single layer. Sprinkle with lemon juice and seasoning as desired (seasoned salt, lemon pepper, chopped parsley, etc.). Cover (fish will pop and spatter).
3. Microwave on high about 2 minutes. Turn fillets. Microwave another 2 minutes on high. Fish is done when it is white and flakes easily. Let sit 2 minutes and serve with lemon, tartar sauce, etc.

WHITEFISH ALMONDINE

1. Rinse and drain fillets, cut into 3-4" chunks.
2. Mix egg and milk in a bowl to a thick batter (about 1 egg/7-8 chunks). Have flour in a bowl or bag. Add seasoned salt if desired.
3. Heat skillet on medium heat. Add oil to cover bottom (a little butter if desired).
4. Roll fish chunks in flour, dip in egg batter. Repeat. Place in single layer in skillet.
5. Cook fish until golden brown on side (about 5 minutes), turn and cook another 5 minutes.



Almondine Sauce

After you turn the fish, heat small skillet or saucepan on medium-high heat. Melt enough butter to cover bottom of pan. Add enough slivered almonds to cover bottom. Stir continuously to prevent burning until golden brown (3-4 minutes) Remove from heat, add a squirt of lemon juice (mixture will bubble up and turn dark). Place fillets on platter and spoon almondine sauce over them.

WHITEFISH SPREAD

Follow directions for microwave whitefish. Flake meat and mix with sour cream or plain yogurt. Serve warm or chilled with your favorite crackers.

BREAD CRUMB FISH TOPPING

- 3-4 Pieces of leftover bread, rolls, or buns.
- Several Sprigs Parsley
- 1 TBSP Sesame Seeds
- Stick Butter or Margarine
- 1 Tsp. Seasoned Salt
- 2 oz. Parmesan Cheese
- Dash Freshly Ground Black Pepper

Tear bread into small pieces and put in food processor with all ingredients except butter/ margarine. Process mixture until coarsely ground. Cut stick butter or margarine into 3 or 4 pieces, add, and process until blended. Dry out topping in a warm oven but do not brown.

- 3 TBSP Flour
- 1 Tsp. Each: Seasoned Salt, Chervil, and Parsley
- 2 TBSP Corn Meal
- 1 TBSP Lemon Juice

Put the basic topping (above) into the processor and grind finely. Add flour, corn meal, and seasonings. Continue to process. Topping will store several months in refrigerator. Dip fillets in beaten egg and milk, roll in topping, and bake or fry until done.

FISHING FOR YELLOW PERCH

This tasty fish is one of the most popular fish in the lake. Flathead can produce 8"-12" perch in good numbers at times of the year. Perch are generally found in more sheltered bays in 5'-30' of water over sandy or silty bottoms and near weedbeds. They feed on zooplankton, aquatic insects, and small fish. One of the very best spots is Polson (East) Bay, both during the winter and spring spawning season in April. Big Arm Bay and more sheltered bays in the south can also produce perch at times. Perch are nomadic and generally run in schools of the same size so move around until you find the fish you want.

The best method is to fish a small leadhead jig with marabou or a twister-style body in white, chartreuse, or yellow. Tip the jig with a maggot, piece of worm, or a small piece of fish or perch eye. Fish straight off your rod or below a bobber if you need to cast out. A little jigging will tempt finicky biters.

DEEP WATER FISH RELEASES

Some lake trout caught in deep water will bloat and can't dive back down. There's a simple tool to successfully release these fish. Using a 50-foot cord, tie about a one-pound weight to one end. About 6"-8" above the weight, tie in a small hardware S-hook in line with knots at the top and bottom. You can also use a large bait hook, size 2 to 1/0. Tie knots at the eye and bend of the hook with the hook pointing down. Pinch down the barb and dull the hook point. To release the fish, hook the top of the S-hook over the fish's jaw and let the weight pull it down. A sharp tug on the cord will release the fish.

FISH CONSUMPTION ADVISORY

Long-lived, oily fish like lake trout and lake whitefish at the top of the food chain can build up levels of mercury (Hg) and PCB's. To minimize exposure you should eat smaller, younger fish or perch. Clean and cook the fish to drain away oils. Adults should eat fish only about once a week and children and women of child-bearing age should only eat fish once a month. For more details contact Montana Department of Public Health, Helena, Montana at (406) 444-2408.

Lake trout from Flathead Lake have moderate to high levels of Hg and PCBs, levels high enough to warrant public advisory warnings on consumption

of larger fish (see chart). Lake whitefish from Flathead Lake had low to moderate levels of Hg ,and PCBs were not detected.

This chart summarizes meal guidelines for consumption of fish with these contaminant levels. Generally, anglers should continue to eat fish, but need to be cautious with regular consumption of lake whitefish and lake trout, particularly the large fish. A Montana Fish Consumption advisory is available from the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services or FWP. Persons following the consumption advisories should experience no health problem.

This chart shows concentrations of mercury and PCBs (ug/g) in fish length groups (inches) and recommended consumption for people eating fish from Flathead Lake over the entire year. Meal guidelines are less restrictive if fish are only eaten on a seasonal basis or for short periods. ND refers to “not detectable.”

Fish Species	Length (inches)	Mercury (ug/g)	PCB (ng/g)	Meal (0.5 lbs) Guidelines for Annual Use
Lake Trout	18 - 28	0.3 - 0.4	< 0.1	Adults – 1 meal/week Women (child bearing years) – 1 meal/month Children – 1 meal/month
	28 - 39	0.6 - 0.9	0.1 - 0.4	Adults – 1 meal/month Women (child bearing years) – don’t eat Children – don’t eat
Lake White fish	11 - 14	0.1	ND	Adults – unlimited Women (child bearing years) – 1 meal/week Children – 1 meal/week
	14 - 19	0.2	ND	Adults – 1 meal/week Women (child bearing years) – 1 meal/month Children – 1 meal/month

LIST OF FOOD BANKS AND COMMUNITY KITCHENS

Please consider contributing your catch to the following community service centers. Please call the center nearest you to ask about how to prepare your catch and where to go to contribute it. * Note: the Flathead Food Bank and the Missoula Food Bank are good initial contacts.

Bigfork Food Bank
128 Village Lane
Bigfork, MT
837-2297

Lakeside Pantry
7151 Highway 93 S
Lakeside, MT
844-2779

North Valley Food Bank
Whitefish, MT
862-5863

Columbia Falls Food Pantry
605-1/2 6th Street E
Columbia Falls, MT 59912

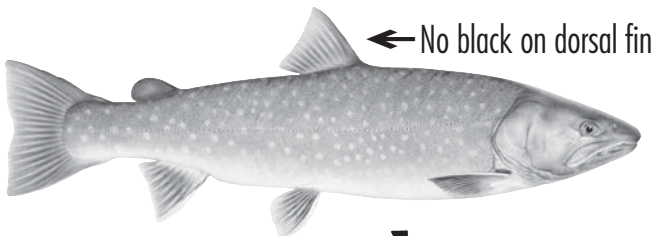
Missoula Food Bank
219 S 3rd St. W
Missoula, MT
549-0543

Fishes and Loaves
Polson Food Bank
Polson, MT
883-6864

Flathead Food Bank
105 6th Av W
Kalispell, MT 59901
752-3663

Most facilities will accept fresh or frozen cleaned or filleted fish.

RELEASE BULL TROUT



Release Properly!
Use Wet Hands



CUTTHROAT YOU CATCH!

No Black Put It Back!
(On bull trout dorsall fin)

Anglers: For local weather conditions log onto the National Weather Service - Missoula, MT. Click on Local Conditions.